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Who will provide leadership at CBD?

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Bonn / New Delhi, 18 May 2009. On May 22, we celebrate the international day of biodiversity and we should recall that the up-coming year will be a crucial year for biodiversity. One year ago, under the Chairmanship of Germany, the parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) met for a Conference of the Parties (COP) in Bonn. The CBD is the only comprehensive agreement on biodiversity. It aims at the conservation of biodiversity, its sustainable use and at the fair and equitable share of the benefits arising out of the use of genetic resources. The parties committed to achieve a significant reduction in the current rate of biodiversity loss by 2010, basically rededicating themselves to the 2010 target, as adopted in April 2002.

Underlining its importance the 2010 target was endorsed by the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the United Nations General Assembly and was incorporated as a new target under the Millennium Development Goals. Furthermore, the governments have set a deadline to finish the negotiations on an international regime of benefit-sharing until 2010. However, due to the slow national implementation of agreed measures and the lengthy international negotiations on future activities the targets appear unachievable.

State of Biodiversity

Although the CBD is in place since 1992 biodiversity is in decline at all levels and geographical scales and the benefits arising from the use are rarely shared. With so much focus on the Copenhagen Summit on climate change, it is amazing to note that biodiversity targets are not attracting enough attention. Further loss of biodiversity would lead to far more dangerous consequences for global climatic balance with grave social consequences.

Inspired by the political impact of the Stern Review of the Economics of Climate Change, in March 2007, the G8+5 environment ministers expressed the need to explore the costs of the loss of ecosystems and biodiversity. The German Minister for the Environment with the support of the European Commissioner for the Environment commissioned Pavan Sukhdev, an Indian economist, to conduct a study on "The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity" (TEEB). First results show that each year we are losing ecosystem services with a value equivalent to around € 50 billion from land-based ecosystems alone. However, globally only between € 10 and 13 billion are invested in biodiversity protection.

Benefit-Sharing Arrangements

Besides its stability function, biodiversity has a high commercial potential. Due to technical progress and the tremendous proliferation of the biotechnology industry in industrialised countries, genetic resources have become important inputs for commercial products (e.g. pharmaceuticals). Given that most of the world's biodiversity-rich countries are developing countries located in the tropics, the benefit-sharing principle implies that users have to share the profits with the providers of the biological material. However, until now providers of biodiversity have received only few benefits. Developing countries are often overextended to implement benefit-sharing regulations and to negotiate fair benefits or users disregard the benefit-sharing regulations and commercialise products without the consent of the providers.



Global Responsibility

With 191 parties nearly every nation in the world has ratified the CBD, except of four countries: Andorra, Iraq, Somalia and the US. The US, being a global biopharmaceutical leader, have chosen not to ratify the CBD in order to protect their industries from benefit-sharing claims and to exclude their own biological resources from an international agreement. However, they have always sent delegations of government officials to attend the negotiations as observers. It is not that the US was always opposed to the convention. The CBD came out after a long deliberation, of which the US was very much a part of. In a dramatic move in September 1994, CBD ratification was removed from the Senate's agenda and since then the ratification issue never came up for voting.

The question is who is taking the leading role on that sprint to the next Conference of the Parties, which will take place in Nagoya in 2010? In the climate change negotiations we observe that Europe and many other countries are relieved that after many years of silence Barack Obama pledges US lead on climate change issues. However, it does not seem that the US will take over the same lead in fighting the loss of biodiversity. Since Germany has the CBD presidency until the next COP, it has the responsibility to further the negotiation process and support the achievement of the self-imposed targets. Furthermore, as leading economies among the highly diverse countries Brazil, India, China and South Africa (BICS) must also step forward and persuade the US to sign the CBD. Being a leading member of the grouping of Like Minded Megadiverse Countries (LMMC) Brazil has already pressed the US for this.

Way Forward

With the elevation of Barack Obama to the US Presidency, people expected a deep change in attitude and approach of America. It is time the US comes out of narrow interests and takes a leadership role on issues concerning benefit-sharing. In this context, influential parties of the CBD, such as Germany as well as the BICS, must play a catalytic role in getting the US on the negotiating table. Furthermore, with the Chair at OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC), Germany may persuade DAC members towards greater sensitivity on biodiversity conservation. As we approach towards 2010 targets it is time to ensure that development cooperation efforts are linked with the CBD's work programmes. Donors and recipients have to contribute to the change in the policy approaches for evolving better conservation strategies.



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